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SUBJECT: KERRY - ASAD: DIVIDING IRAQ AND UNIFYING IRAN

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C/NF) Summary: Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Senator John Kerry told President Asad that he believed progress was being made in Iraq and the U.S. wanted to withdraw its troops as soon as possible. The recent provincial elections in Iraq had been the first real, positive sign that Iraq was moving forward and the first demonstration of the legitimacy of the GOI's authority, Asad said, but the U.S. should give the Iraqi leadership "more space" or they will be labelled American puppets. Before the U.S. leaves Iraq, Asad said, it must ensure that it won't allow federalism to fragment the country. If Iraq were to break down into federal states, the Sunni state, Asad predicted, would be governed by al-Qaeda and the Shi-ite state by Iran. The Kurds will end up fighting with Turkey, Iran, and Syria. Syria and Iran see Iraq differently from each other. Asad advised that the U.S. must view Iran as a Persian state, more than as a Shi-ite state) the cultural identity, he implied, is more important than the religious identify. "Don't bet on Khatami's candidacy (in Iran's June presidential elections)," Asad warned. "You can make deals with Ahmadinejad more (readily) than you can with Khatami . . . Never mind the rhetoric, Ahmadinejad has political power." Kerry expressed concern over Iran's continued pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability and Asad responded by saying there should be a mechanism for monitoring Iran's nuclear activities; states do not operate on trust. Asad said it is necessary to shift discussion from Iran's right to nuclear technology to means of monitoring its activities. By attacking Iran's right, Asad said, "you unify Iran." End Summary.

12. (C) Senator John Kerry emphasized a new U.S. approach to diplomacy in the Middle East during a February 21 meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad that lasted more than two hours. Also attending the meeting were Syrian FM Walid al-Muallim, Presidential Advisor for Political and Media Affairs Bouthaina Shaaban, and Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. Imad Mustafa. Kerry was accompanied by Charge as well as SFRC staffers Frank Lowenstein and Perry Cammack. This cable reports on the discussion of Syria's perspective on developments in Iraq and in Iran. Other issues are reported septels.

U.S. Should Give Iraqi Leadership "More Space"

13. (C/NF) During their February 21 meeting, Senator Kerry

told President Asad that he believed progress was being made in Iraq and the U.S. wanted to withdraw its troops as soon as possible. Asad agreed that the key factor in stabilizing Iraq was the decision of Sunni leaders in Anbar province to reject al-Qaeda; he believed that the surge of 30,000 U.S. troops had not been as critical to progress as had the rejection of al-Qaeda. Iraqi PM Nuri al-Maliki has moved in a realistic way on reconciliation, Asad allowed, observing it was more difficult now to commit "sectarian assassinations." The recent provincial elections in Iraq had been the first real, positive sign that Iraq was moving forward and the first demonstration of the legitimacy of the GOI's authority, he said; "that's a development that can be built upon." "Maliki doesn't like us," Asad noted, "he is stubborn but good, a legitimate leader." Maliki can move forward now with greater confidence, he said, but the U.S. should give the Iraqi leadership "more space" or they will be labelled American puppets. Both Maliki and FM Hoshyar Zebari have told the Syrians that the U.S. must understand that it can't keep the Iraqi government under pressure anymore, Asad confided. FM Muallim added that, when Asad had met with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, Asad had agreed to help on Iraqi reconciliation by sending Muallim to Baghdad, followed later by a visit by SARG PM Muhammad Naji al-Utri.

Federalism Equals Fragmentation

14. (C/NF) Asserting that the main power in Iraq is the U.S., Asad asked Kerry what was the U.S. vision for Iraq? Syria

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had supported the political process by sending an ambassador to Baghdad but Syria needed to know what the U.S. planned for the future. The question, he believed, was not when to leave Iraq but how) if there is no political process the situation in Iraq will only become worse. The U.S. must leave Iraq in stability so that the Iraqi people have some appreciation for the U.S. role. "It is not our (Syria's) goal," he said, for the U.S. to be "humiliated" in Iraq. President Obama had sent Iraqis an important signal with his announcement that U.S. troops should withdraw in 18 (sic) months but, before that happens, the U.S. needs to work on the divisions among Iraqis who favor either federalism or a strong central government. In Iraq, federalism would have to be organized along sectarian and ethnic lines and that would have negative results. The Sunni state, Asad predicted, would be governed by al-Qaeda and the Shi-ite state by Iran. The Kurds will end up fighting with Turkey, Iran, and Syria. Kerry said he didn't see any way that the Kurds would not seek to protect the lines of their autonomous territory, a position that Asad called short-sighted: "They will be isolated," he said.

Syria and Iran: Different Views on Iraq

15. (C/NF) Asked if there were any other way the lines of federalism could be drawn, Asad mused that SIIC leader Abdul-Aziz Hakim had favored a secular state and Maliki had won because he had adopted a position in favor of a unified Iraq. The problem, he concluded, is with the Kurds. The main power is in KDP leader Massoud Barzani's hands. Asked about Iran's intentions, Asad said it was difficult to answer. The Iranians don't talk about details, only their "big goals." Syria and Iran see Iraq differently (from each other), he said, explaining that Syria sees Iraq through an Arab lens while Iran is focused on the Shi-ite angle. Shifting gears, Asad advised that the U.S. must view Iran as a Persian state, more than as a Shi-ite state) the cultural identity, he implied, is more important than the religious identity. "Don't bet on Khatami's candidacy (in Iran's June presidential elections)," Asad warned. "You can make deals with Ahmadinejad more (readily) than you can with Khatami . .

. Never mind the rhetoric, Ahmadinejad has political power."

"You unify Iran"

¶6. (C/NF) Kerry expressed concern over Iran's continued pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability and Asad responded by saying there should be a mechanism for monitoring Iran's nuclear activities; states do not operate on trust. Asad recalled that after French President Nicholas Sarkozy had met with him in Damascus in September 2008, Asad had met with Iranian National Security Advisor Saïd Jallili to convey Syria's position against WMD proliferation. Jallili had told Asad, he said, that Iran respects the NPT had had no military ambitions for its nuclear program. Jallili declared that Iran has the right to a civilian nuclear program; hence the "European" three-phase plan that called for suspension of sanctions in return for suspension of uranium enrichment was not acceptable. Asad had concluded, he said, that suspension was not the answer; rather there should be monitoring of Iran's nuclear program) a mechanism for observers was needed. Iran won't stop its program, he said, so it is necessary to shift discussion from Iran's right to nuclear technology to means of monitoring its activities. By attacking Iran's right, Asad said, "you unify Iran." Kerry asked if Asad believed that Iran would agree to an additional protocol regarding monitoring but Asad said he didn't know, he and Jallili had not talked about it.

¶7. (C/NF) Comment: Asad was uncharacteristically candid in alluding to his differences with Iran over Iraq and Iran's nuclear program. After three U.S. codels and a string of other recent visitors, he may be tiring of defending Iran's defiance of the IAEA and UNSC. Because of Syria's own problem with the IAEA, however, he must tread very carefully when discussing the Iranian issue. On Iraq, Asad probably thought his remarks were conciliatory ("it is not our goal for the U.S. to be humiliated in Iraq") and, while his advice had not been sought, his focus on potential fragmentation illuminates Syrian anxieties regarding the future of Iraq. End Comment.

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¶8. (U) Codel Kerry has cleared this message.
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